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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet describes "learning challenges," a method of classroom organization designed to meet the needs, strengths, and interest of children at all levels of development. These challenges are a means by which teachers can individualize their programs and invite their students to explore, think, create, and respond. The pamphlet presents practical examples of many such challenges (such as innovative ways of modeling or demonstrating aspects of writing or reading) and gives advice on how teachers can create their own learning challenges, establish a conducive classroom environment, and monitor the outcome. (RS)

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LEARNING CHALLENGES

by Vicki Hill, Genevieve Hudson, Daphne Richards

Are you searching for a way to stimulate children's thinking, develop their independence and encourage them to accept the responsibility and ownership of their work?

Have you ever wondered how to cater for every child's individual needs in your classroom?

One way to do this (and more!) is through establishing learning challenges.

Learning challenges are a method of classroom organisation, designed to meet the strengths, needs and interests of children. Challenges can be established in the classroom as learning experiences for children at all levels of development. They are a means by which teachers can individualise their programs. A learning challenge is an invitation to explore, think, create and respond.

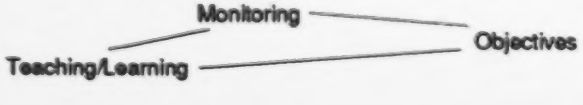
One way to present a challenge is to create a learning space where a challenge can be established with all the necessary resources.

Note how this teacher has offered an experience which children can work at independently.

The challenge reads: 'How many different ways can you find to use this material? Share your most interesting one.'

PLANNING CHALLENGES

From their observations, teachers establish objectives for individuals, small groups and the whole group. Teachers plan learning challenges to meet these objectives. Such planning follows a cyclic process.



For example,

During a reading conference, Andrew's teacher observed that he was able to identify the main characters in the story he was reading, discuss facts and details, and was willing to offer his opinions about the characters and their actions. In response to these observations, the teacher established the following objectives for Andrew – to encourage Andrew to discuss character traits in greater detail and develop his confidence in justifying his opinions.

This photograph captures children working at the listening post on the following challenge which was designed with Andrew's specific needs in mind. The challenge reads:

'How have these authors chosen to represent princesses in their stories? Does this vary from your usual image of a princess?
Why do you think the authors have done this?'

The literature used for this experience is listed under Cross Curriculum Challenges on page 5 of this pamphlet.

Presentation

Learning challenges may be presented to the children in a variety of ways. They may be offered to the whole group, a small group or to individuals. However teachers need to remember that learning challenges are established to meet the specific needs of individuals, and therefore the purpose and the audience for the

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learning challenge is going to influence how the experience is to be presented. The challenges may be written on cards and presented on learning centre units along with any necessary resources in the classroom or corridor spaces. Opportunities may also arise for the teacher to pose challenges through small group discussions and may not require any special resources to be established.

For example,

This teacher has observed children naturally exploring publishers' blurbs through their reading and using this technique in their own writing. The teacher has then planned to use literature to demonstrate the particular features of publishers' blurbs.

In this photograph the children are engaged in a planned discussion about the blurbs they have included in their published books. The teacher is using literature as a model for this aspect of publishing.

Many challenges are designed with individual and shared needs in mind and all children are invited to explore and participate in the experiences which have been established.

For example,

After noticing four children becoming frustrated in their attempts to decode print by using inappropriate reading strategies, a teacher initiated a challenge at a learning centre using cloze technique in a shared book. The teacher's objective was to encourage these children to read for meaning and substitute unknown words meaningfully.

The challenge reads:

'Read this shared book with a friend. What do you think the covered word will be? Think of one or two words which have the same meaning and would make sense.'

Challenges are modelled from real life experiences and create purposes for children's learning. They may arise from children's daily experiences and involve them in reacting in ways which develop strategies for independent problem solving in daily life. This photograph illustrates how challenges can be used to practice skills required in real life situations. This challenge is designed to encourage children to develop efficient grouping and counting strategies.

The challenge reads:

'Estimate the number of blocks in the basket.
How did you estimate? What did you do?
What are the different ways you can count the blocks by grouping them? What is the best way for you?'

Meeting Individual Needs

Challenges need to be worded in ways which allow the children to approach the challenge at their own [illegible] An open challenge (that is, a challenge that allows for a wide range of responses) enables children to draw upon their own experiences, learning, knowledge and skills.

The degree of 'openness' is dependent upon the children's ability to interpret the challenge and formulate their own questions. The children can then arrive at their own strategies for investigation questions that have become their own.

Closed questions can be easily opened by careful wording.

For example the closed challenge:

'Use these tools to make a rough texture.
Make a print of it'

can be improved to say:

'How many different ways can you use these tools to create different textures and patterns?
Observe the effects you've made.
Share the ones you like best.'

By making the challenge open, children can assume greater responsibility in the decision making. The potential for learning is increased and the range of children's responses has widened.

Ultimately the facilitator is developing the learners' ability to tackle increasingly open-ended challenges.

By being aware of the questions children have posed for themselves the teacher is able to facilitate further investigation.

This awareness leads from interacting with learners at challenges, listening to and talking with the learners. By asking the learner about the process they have been involved in, children clarify their learning. The questions the facilitator asks are determined by the child's level of development and the nature of the challenge.

Questions should be designed to encourage

- a search into the depths of the challenge
- probing into the unknown
- verbalizing the outcomes of the challenge to clarify and to evaluate learning.

MONITORING OUTCOMES

Children can be made more aware of their discoveries through encouragement from the facilitator to communicate their predictions, explorations and hypotheses, and opportunities for sharing these need to be an integral part of the program. Sharing provides time for self evaluation, refinement and reflection. Learners are able to model and demonstrate the processes of learning they have been involved in.

It is through observations of the sharing the teachers can evaluate their effectiveness in providing a challenge to meet individual needs.

ESTABLISHING NATURAL LEARNING CONDITIONS

When planning learning challenges, teachers need to consider how the conditions of learning can be fostered. These conditions, as identified by Brian Cambourne (1984), need to be facilitated within every experience we provide for children.

- Immersion
- Demonstration
- Expectation
- Engagement
- Responsibility
- Approximation
- Response

Immersion and Demonstration

In real life learners are immersed in situations that pose challenges and require decisions to be made and problems to be solved.

In the classroom environment, adults and peers need to model ways in which they explore and react to everyday challenges, and share with children strategies for problem solving.

Expectation

By establishing challenges in the classroom, teachers are communicating an expectation that children will investigate planned challenges. The learners have an expectation that they will successfully engage in the experience.

Engagement

Challenges should pose questions, stimulate creativity and initiate inquiry on the part of the learner. This fosters a desire to explore and so to engage in learning experiences.

An anaesthetically pleasing environment will promote the learners' willingness to engage in the tasks.

Responsibility

Learners have the responsibility to take from the experience that which is relevant to them. Challenges that are open-ended enable learners to select their preferred way of responding to the challenge.

Children may choose to respond through experiences such as writing, reading, talking, taping, drawing, printing, painting, or constructing.

The challenge reads:
"Use these instruments to consider the volume of different sounds. Explore the range of volume possible with your favourite instrument. Order your experiments into a sequence you like.
Think of an unusual way to share your work.'

Approximation

The open nature of challenges enables children to interpret the task and approximate in a way that is appropriate to their individual level of development.

Open challenges allow children to arrive at a variety of answers. The challenge reads:
'Design a clockface for your home.
Think carefully about what it should look like.'

Response

Children's responses need to be valued and shared. Children are able to clarify what they have learned through discussion with an audience. This allows children to engage in self-evaluation, to refine and reflect on their own learning.

THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

When learning challenges are integral to the teacher's program, decisions need to be made regarding the learning spaces and routines.

Learning Spaces

Learning spaces should allow the teacher to create an environment in which individual, small group and whole group experiences can be implemented.

To facilitate this, furniture should be arranged so that there are spaces for individual and shared experiences. Areas should be provided for quiet and active learning which can serve specific purposes, purposes such as publishing and writing, visual art, reading and whole class sharing. Materials should be organised on a self-serve basis so learners can help themselves to resources they require. Traffic areas need to be closely considered to reduce interruption and foster children's commitment to their own learning. Learning challenges should be established in clearly defined spaces enabling children to work in comfort.

Teachers should keep in mind that learning centres can be established both inside and outside the classroom. Children come to use these spaces responsibly after particular rules have been negotiated. It is vital that the teacher interacts with the children at the established challenges. This encourages children to clarify and refine their discoveries.

Routines

It is important to establish sound classroom routines from the start.

Such an environment allows the teacher to establish a highly predictable routine. Once predictable routines are in place, teachers will find it easier to individualise their teaching. Children will also appreciate this routine as they have a clear understanding of what is expected of them.

The sample routine offered here is one that allows the children to determine the order of individual challenges, undertaken throughout the day. Additional whole group times could be scheduled when the need arises.

This routine provides learning experiences for the children on a daily basis. The framework remains the same each day; however, the scope and variety of the challenge is wide enough to allow children the opportunity to make decisions about what they do in the challenge.

ROUTINE	CHILD	TEACHER
Whole group experience		
maths science movement/music/drama shared book/literature quiet reading	Exploring Thinking Listening Responding Predicting Retelling Discussing	Arousing children's interest. Maintaining/fostering enthusiasm. Introducing/exploring challenges. Supporting children in decision making.
Individual/Shared Learning Challenges		
Language • writing • reading • visual art Maths • number • measurement • spatial awareness	Children are engaged in learning challenges i.e., • beginning a new challenge • further exploration and refinement of a previous challenge • creating their own challenges	Modelling/demonstrating aspects of writing reading maths Roving conferences Individual conferences Recording observations.
Challenges at learning centres	Thinking/reflecting about learning	Teacher working with small groups who share a common need.
Sharing	Thinking/reflecting about learning Talking/listening Responding and questioning	Providing opportunities for children to act as models for peers. Perceiving children's strengths and needs. Valuing children's opinions.

CROSS CURRICULUM CHALLENGES

When establishing challenges, teachers must consider the needs of the individual children in their own classrooms. The following written challenges provide a model for teachers creating their own, and can be worded appropriately to cater for different levels of development and the children's previous experiences. The ideal situation occurs when teachers plan their own challenges from observations of their children.

TITLE	AUTHOR	CHALLENGE
The Teams William Collins, Sydney 1986	Henry Lawson John Anthony King	How do John Anthony King's illustrations complement the text? Can you achieve a similar effect using materials of your choice?
Clark Viking O'Neil, Melbourne 1987	Max Dann	Could you design a perfect teacher of the future? You might choose: ~ to write ~ to talk ~ to create a piece of art work.
Farmer Schultz's Ducks Walter McVitty Books, Glebe 1986	Colin Thiele	Choose the part in the story which has the description you like most. Record some of the words and phrases used by the author which helps create a picture in your mind.
Selection of Books	Pat Hutchins	Ask each person in your class what their favourite Pat Hutchins' book is. Explore ways of making a graph using the information you have collected.
Papa, Please Get the Moon for me Picture Book Studio, USA 1986	Eric Carle	The writer has used a device in this book to take the reader from the real world into fantasy. Think about the device used in this story. You may like to: ~ create your own story ~ share your ideas with a friend ~ find some other stories that use a different device.
The Paper Bag Princess Scholastic Book Services, London UK/Gosford NSW 1986	R. Munsch	How have these authors depicted princesses? How does this differ from a traditional idea of a princess? What messages are these authors saying about princesses?
The Tough Princess Walker, London UK 1986	Martin Waddell	
Princess Smartypants Hamlish Hamilton, London UK 1986	Babette Cole	
The Princess who Hated it Omnibus Books Adelaide 1986	Robin Klein Marie Smith	

The challenge reads:
'Try this simple investigation into crystals.
How do crystals differ from non-crystals?
How will you record your investigations and your findings?'

Other Suggestions

- What can you discover about the size of your body using strings?
- How many ways can you find to sort these numbers?
- What's the most interesting shape that you can make that's as wide as your hands span?
- Blow up the balloon and let it go. Do this 3 or 4 times.
  Map the path your balloon took. How could you change the path it takes?
  Find a way to show how you did it.
  Why does your balloon fly?

FURTHER READING

Learning Spaces, COPE, Tasmanian Ed. Dept., 1980.
Primary Language Guidelines, Tasmanian Ed. Dept., 1982.

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Cambourne, B. 'Language Learning & Literacy', Chapter 2 in *Towards a Reading-Writing Classroom,* edited by A. Butler and J. Tubill, Rozelle, NSW, PETA, 1984.

About the authors

Vicki Hill is senior teacher in the Early Childhood area at Lilydale High School, Tasmania.

In 1987 she was appointed as Infant Consultant to work with teachers in the Northern Region of Tasmania, working alongside teachers in schools and conducting seminars and workshops.

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Daphne has a particular interest in investigating the conditions of learning and the application of these conditions to classroom experiences.

Genevieve Hudson is Senior Teacher at Westbury Primary School. In 1986-87 Genevieve was working in the North of Tasmania as Language Consultant, helping teachers to individualize their programs to cater for all children's needs.

Genevieve has a particular interest in the role of the classroom environments and in children's learning.

All three authors have been extensively involved with the trialling and dissemination of *Pathways* materials, over several years.

The views expressed in this pamphlet are the views of the author. They do not necessarily represent the view of the editor or the Australian Reading Association.

The success of the Reading Around Series depends on the willingness of people to contribute. If you have ideas for classroom practice which you would like to share with a wider audience we would like to hear from you. A small fee is paid for published manuscripts. Contributions and enquiries should be sent to Dr Fred Gollasch, PO Box 588, WAGGA WAGGA, NSW, 2650.

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